

### Unintended Effects of Advertising: An Updated Qualitative Review

Xu, Jie

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# Unintended Effects of Advertising: An Updated Qualitative Review

Jie Xu  
Villanova University, USA  
jie.xu@villanova.edu

## Abstract

Like most strategic communication efforts, advertising produces both intended and unintended effects. However, there has been little systematic effort to synthesizing the unintended effects of advertising. This paper attempt to fill the gap in the literature. A thematic review was conducted to review the dimensions, types, and theories concerning the unintended effects of advertising. Variations of unintended effects in valence, levels of analysis, time lapse, content specificity, and audience types were discerned, on the basis of which a typology of nine unintended effects was proposed, including confusion, materialism, idealization, stereotypes, boomerang, violence, creativity, job performance and economic growth. The implications and directions for future research were discussed. It is hoped that the conceptual dimensions and types of unintended effects presented in this paper will serve as an evolving framework for endeavors to enhancing the theory and practice of advertising.

## Highlights

- State of the literature at June 2019.
- The current study aims to provide an up-to-date synthesis depicting the state of the art on the unintended effects of advertising.
- A thematic analysis approach was taken in this qualitative review.
- We reviewed three primary theoretical frameworks used in the literature, unfolded five main dimensions, and introduced a typology of nine types of unintended effects.
- Three dominating theories in this area are: Psychological Reactance Theory (PRT), Social Comparison Theory, and Cultivation theory.
- Five dimensions include variations in valence, levels of analysis, time lapse, content specificity, and audience types.
- Nine types of unintended effects are: confusion, materialism, idealization, stereotypes, boomerang, violence, creativity, job performance, and economic growth.
- Future research should explore whether there is a blur between intended and unintended effects, as well as strengthen both theoretical and empirical inquires within this branch of advertising scholarship.

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There are both intended and unintended consequences of any social actions, including communication efforts. There has been early recognition among communication scholars of the potential of communication outcomes deviating from intention. Shannon and Weaver (1949) raise attention to “noise” in the communicative process. Schramm (1961) points out that communication outcomes result from multiple forces, among which the communicator can only control one: the sender. Regardless, unintended effects have remained both under-theorized and under-researched in

communication (Cho & Salmon, 2007). Neuman (2018) labelled the lack of attention on miscommunication and unintended consequences in media effects as “a paradoxical paradigmatic gap: a theoretical blind spot” (p.369). He argues that broadening research to unintended effects not only represents some of the most fruitful lines of scholarly inquiry, but also connects the humanistic and scientific traditions within the communication field (Neuman, 2018). Compared with intended effects, the unintended effects are potentially more challenging to detangle (Pollay, 1986).

Currently, there are some efforts devoted to miscommunication and unintended effects, mostly in health communication (Cho & Salmon, 2007).

Communication is a constituent element of advertising in that it distinguishes advertising from other marketing tools and relates it to relevant communication subareas (Eisend, 2016). Similar to other forms of communication, advertising has a broad range of intended and unintended effects. Scholarly attention to unintended effects of advertising (especially those on children) started in the early 1970s and reached its peak in the 1980s (e.g., Pollay, 1986), after which the interest on the subject began to wane. A couple of decades later, scholars (e.g., Bujizen & Valkenburg, 2003; Preston, 1999) have started to revitalize the topic. Recent studies (e.g., Dahlen & Rosengren, 2016) called on advertisers to devote more efforts in examining and assessing the unintended effects of advertising, which includes a wide range of outcomes for children and adults. Still, there is a pressing need for an updated and comprehensive inquiry on this subject, expounding many of its aspects. There were only two reviews in this area (Pollay, 1986; Preston, 1999), both were conducted over two decades ago and are largely descriptive, with one limiting the discussion to the impact among children (e.g., Preston, 1999). The current study attempts to fill the gap, which is significant, given that more recent evidence demonstrates that both for profit and not-for-profit ads have unintended consequences (e.g., Edwards, Li & Lee, 2002; Xu, 2019). This review aims to provide an up-to-date synthesis depicting the state of the art on the unintended effects of advertising.

### Unintended Effects in Advertising: Overview and the Current Study

Extending Richards and Curran's (2002) definition of advertising as "designed to persuade" (p.74), Dahlen and Rosengren (2016) proposed an updated working definition of advertising as the "brand-initiated communication intent on impacting people" (p.334). Brand is a rather loose concept, which can refer to an actual brand, a person, or a cause. The ultimate pursuit of advertising is to generate a brand-related reaction among consumers that is beneficial to the brand (Eisend, 2016). There are two broad categories of criticism of advertising (Kopf, Torres, & Enomoto, 2011). One is that advertising inflates product prices, thereby

making it wasteful and counterproductive to profitability. Second, advertising induces a number of undesirable social and psychological outcomes, particularly among youth (e.g., materialism).

Although advertising research has predominantly focused on intended effects among individual consumers, it has many effects that differ in functionality and are either means or ends. Not all effects are pertinent to the ultimate purpose of advertising. Effects that are simply means to an end are less stable and more strongly context dependent (Eisend, 2016). The intended effects of advertising are typically considered as achieving traditional business communication goals manifest in consumption, several studies (Gulas & McKeage, 2000; Preston, 1999; Pollay, 1986) have loosely defined the unintended effects as consumer responses that do not result in a commercial outcome, irrelevant or dissatisfactory to a definite commercial strategy. On the other hand, advertising could make use of unintended effects and apply them to achieve its final goals (Eisend, 2016). Despite solid evidence of advertising campaigns yielding counterproductive results, understandably, the advertising industry tends to downplay such findings (Neuman, 2018). In fact, Dahlen and Rosengren (2016) argued for the extended effects of advertising beyond individual consumer responses to social and economic effects, which is particularly interesting to future advertising and helps it stay relevant.

The current study is partially inspired by Cho and Salmon's (2007) seminal work on health communication. Their qualitative review put forward a typology organizing 11 types of unintended effects, such as obfuscation, dissonance, and boomerang. We take a different focus on advertising aiming to provide a methodologically-sound and evidence-based indication of the current state of unintended effects of advertising. The primary goal is to present an overview of the identity and intellectual core of this important field in advertising theory and practice. Specifically, we propose the following questions.

RQ1: What are the theoretical frameworks employed in published advertising scholarship to investigate the unintended effects?

RQ2: What are the dimensions of unintended effects examined in the published advertising scholarship?

RQ3: What are the types of unintended effects examined in the published advertising scholarship?

To answer the three RQs, we embarked on a thematic

analysis of 46 peer-reviewed journal articles spanning over four decades (1978-2019) to shed light on broad patterns within the literature. These articles appeared across 32 Advertising and Communication journals, encompassing top-tier outlets in both areas, such as *Journal of Advertising*, *International Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Communication*, and *Communication Research*, among others. By presenting an up-to-date synopsis, it attempts to map the existing body of knowledge and to identify gaps in the literature.

## Method

### Study Retrieval

Two steps were taken to identify pertinent studies that focused on the unintended effects in advertising. First, we looked for original research until June 2019 using the search terms unintended effects, unintended consequences, unexpected consequences, unanticipated consequences, and advertising in the following databases: Business Source Complete, Communication & Mass Media Complete, Google Scholar, PsycArticles, and Web of Science. Second, we examined the reference lists of the identified articles in the previous step to identify additional pertinent research.

Although this approach cannot guarantee the inclusion of every single study, it led to a considerably exhaustive list of published studies. Missing studies, if at all, were missing randomly rather than systematically, which should not affect the overall findings. The search resulted in 58 articles, 46 of them were empirical studies. The publications represented scholarly and practitioner perspectives from both within and outside of the US, which enhances the scope and applicability of the findings.

### Thematic Analysis Procedure

Following the study retrieval, the data (papers) were analyzed using six steps of thematic synthesis, a qualitative method that entails identifying, analyzing, and reporting repeated patterns of meaning across a data corpus (e.g., a variety of texts) (Braun & Clark, 2006). A theme captures a key aspect of the data in a patterned manner in relation to the overall research question, regardless of whether that theme counts toward the majority on quantifiable measures

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are two primary ways in which themes can be identified in the analysis. Taking the bottom up way, the inductive coding does not fit the process into a preexisting coding frame. The themes identified are closely associated with the data, not the researcher's analytic presumptions. It should be acknowledged, however, that themes are not sorted out in an epistemological vacuum as researchers are not entirely isolated from their theoretical preconceptions. In contrast, a deductive thematic analysis is driven by the researcher's analytic interest. It tends to concentrate more on some aspects of the data rather than providing a detailed description of the overall picture (Braun & Clark, 2006). There is no one right way to proceed with thematic analysis, although the inductive approach requires reading and re-reading of the data and diverse coding (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Specifically, the six-step analytic procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006) includes the following: a): familiarizing with the texts with repeated and active reading, searching for meanings and patterns; b): generating initial codes by collating the data with a tentative thematic map depicting an overall conceptualization of the patterns; c): collating initial codes into potential themes and sub-themes; d): reviewing themes in relation to the coded extracts, focusing on how they are different and yet fit together with the overarching narrative; e): defining and naming themes on their essence, scope and content; f): producing the report in which exemplar examples are located that provide compelling evidence of the theme and relate to the research questions. It is worth noting that thematic analysis is not performed linearly from one phase to the next. Rather, it is likely a recursive process, in which the analysis is back and forth as needed throughout the exercise (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Findings

### Theoretical Frameworks

RQ1 focuses on the theoretical frameworks in the field. Despite being a nascent area, scholars have proposed several theoretical frameworks to investigate the subject matter. The theories that have been dominating the area are: Psychological Reactance Theory (PRT), Social Comparison Theory, and Cultivation theory.



The extant research examining counterproductive effects of advertising employs PRT, which argues that people are proud of themselves in making independent decisions (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Therefore, if their specific attitudinal and behavioral rights to choose their own options are threatened, reactance occurs (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). PRT has been observed in various commerce contexts, including advertising (Edwards et al., 2002). According to PRT, consumers value the freedom to solidify their attitudes about a corporation. Explicit persuasive efforts may be perceived as a blatant persuasive tactic, making the consumers feel that their freedom to form their own judgments is being jeopardized, which consequently elicits reactance.

Idealized images in advertising messages create social comparison standards, a prevalent unintended effect that is best explained by the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). Individuals are internally motivated to conform to societal norms in forming their identity and the sense of self (Festinger, 1954). The theory has long served as a basis for understanding the impact of certain social ideals conveyed through advertising. The vast majority of social comparison research in advertising focuses on how the internalization of societal ideals leads to negative self-perception and subsequent behaviors, such as body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Gulas & McKeage, 2000).

The idea that advertising may have long-term unintended effects (e.g., stereotyping and violence) is reminiscent of Cultivation Theory. This theory claims that the reality depicted in the media, including advertising, is a distorted version of the objective reality, which in turn affects people's beliefs, attitudes, and values (Potter, 2014). Research on cultivation theory, however, typically focuses on the "programs between the ads" (Shrum, 1999, p.119) rather than on the ads themselves. There is a need to distinguish cultivation effects resulting from ad exposure from cultivation effects led by television programs.

After reviewing three major themes of the theoretical frameworks (RQ1), the analysis moved to dimensions (RQ2) and types of unintended effects (RQ3).

## The Dimensions of Unintended Effects

Unintended effects are often multidimensional and diverse as they are divergent in key areas such as unit of analysis, direction, and context. In addressing RQ2 on the identification of the key dimensions, it is helpful to consider

Cho and Salmon's (2007) seminal work on health communication, in which five dimensions of unintended effects were presented including variations in valence, levels of analysis, time lapse, content specificity, and audience types. The five dimensions are derived from "the vintage point of classical and contemporary theories of communication and other social sciences" (Cho & Salmon, 2007, p.295), which is also consistent with more recent syntheses in communication (e.g., Arendt et al., 2017).

### Valence: Undesirable or desirable.

Persuasion is essential to advertising, as it aims to persuade people and change their attitudes or behaviors. We define the desirability of the effects based on whether they are in line with or conducive to the advertisers' intentions. Although the unintended effects are predominantly undesirable, they should not be presupposed to be negative. In fact, advertising might generate desirable unintended effects. For example, the positive effects of advertising creativity on consumers seem to translate into positive effects on their consumption of the media context, which subsequently benefit media owners (Rosengren, Dahlen, & Modig, 2013). On a macro level, advertising may positively impact the economy in the long term, indicating its constructive role in society (Kopf et al., 2011).

### Level of analysis: Individual or societal.

Most of the unintended effects of advertising settle on the individual level, generating changes in individual consumers. The unintended effects might also be on society as a whole, although the boundary is difficult to draw at times (Cho & Salmon, 2007). Kim, Hayes, Avant, and Reid (2014) found that two-thirds of studies examining advertising effects from 1980 to 2010 focused on cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses on individual consumers, such as brand attitudes, ad liking, and purchase intentions, in line with the intended effects. They found that about 10% of the reviewed research investigated social effects, such as economic growth (e.g., Kopf et al., 2011), body ideals (e.g., Gulas & McKeage, 2000), and stereotypes (e.g., Maher, Herbst, Childs, & Finn, 2008). These effects illustrate the macro consequences of advertising on the social process that are beyond the traditional boundary of individual effects. A considerable portion of studies on unintended effects focused on social consequences of advertising.

### Content-specific or content-diffusive effects.

McLeod and Reeves (1980) pointed out that communication effects may be relevant or irrelevant to the content in question, a proposition also applicable to the advertising context. Some unintended effects are generated primarily due to the specific content in the ads. For example, Johar (1996) examined the effects of corrective advertising (i.e., ads that correct for previous claims found to be deceptive) appeared to result in further confusion. Erdogan (2008) noted the unintended consequences of controversial advertising with “shock” value. Green and Armstrong (2012) found that government-mandated disclaimers or admonishments aiming to alter behaviors often have effects opposite to those intended. Pinkleton (1998) reported that certain comparative and negative political advertising led to voter backlash. On the other hand, some unintended effects are content-diffusive, not driven by any particular content featured in the ads. For example, Edwards, Li and Lee (2002) revealed that online “pop-up” ads largely generated irritation, avoidance, and reactance, which was due to the messages’ intrusive nature interfering with the cognitive task that consumers were engaged with at the moment.

### Target audience: Intended or unintended.

To provide a proper understanding of the function that advertising plays in society, the scope of investigation on unintended effects should include both the advertiser’s intended and unintended audience members. External publics may be part of unintended audience. For example, Arby’s “Slice Up Freshness” advertising reached the unintended audiences: Iowa farmers. “This is where they slice the meat... Iowa. That’s a long walk for a turkey sandwich.” Although not the target, some Iowans felt attacked and were vocal with

their criticisms (Crompton, 2014). Unintended audience may also include internal employees. Seriki, Evans, Jeon, Dant, and Helm (2016) revealed that if employees found advertising messages of their company incongruent with their values or filled with inaccurate claims, their commitment to the organization and job satisfaction were negatively affected.

### Time lapse: Long or short term.

Effects of communication can be either long-term or short-term, the strength of which may attenuate or dissipate over time. Outcomes insignificant in the short-term may come out strong over the long-term (Cho & Salmon, 2007). Exposure to advertising may gradually or immediately alter an individual’s original knowledge, attitude, or behavior unintentionally. For example, watching violence-loaded ads over time may make a person more likely to believe the world is a mean and violent place (Rifon, Royne, & Carlson, 2010). Ads with stereotypical viewpoints may exert a long-term reinforcement effect, which serves to maintain the status quo with a particular effect. In contrast, short-term effect is much more prevalent in advertising studies. There is typically a short-lived fluctuation in responses (e.g., reactance) immediately after exposure to particular ads (Edwards et al., 2002).

## Typology of Unintended Effects

Addressing RQ3, the thematic review of the advertising literature leads to a typology of unintended effects. Overall, nine types of unintended effects are discussed<sup>1</sup>. Patton (1990) proposed dual criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity in defining and naming themes. Extracts of texts within themes should cohere together meaningfully;

<sup>1</sup> The third-person effect proposes people perceive that media messages (such as advertising) have a stronger effect on others than themselves and the perceptual gap might lead to a behavioral outcome (Baek, 2017). It has been regarded as a caveat (i.e., a special condition) of media effects (Harris & Sanborn, 2013). We did not include it in the typology as it is not defined as a two-way directional condition but rather a one-way influence, distinguished from other unintended (or intended) effects examined in the literature. The third-person effect, particularly the perceptual component, has been investigated in various advertising contexts, such as direct-to-consumer (DTC) drug advertising (Huh, DeLorme, & Reid, 2004), controversial product advertising (Jensen & Collins, 2008), deceptive advertising (Xie, 2016), gambling advertising (Youn, Faber, & Shah, 2000), online cosmetic surgery advertising (Lim, 2017), celebrity-endorsed advertising (CEA) (Pan & Meng, 2018) and e-cigarette advertising (Pardun, McKeever, & Bedingfield, 2017). A recent meta-analysis indicates that third-person perceptions in product advertising are weaker when compared to other communication messages, further, perceived effects on self or others are better behavioral predictors than the third-person perceptual gap (Eisend, 2017), which is different from the theory’s original proposition.

there should also be identifiable distinctions between themes. As with probably any kind of research categorization, the differences among the nine types are not hard and fast. It might not be an exhaustive list because unintended effects (especially negative ones) are likely underreported (Cho & Salmon, 2007). The five dimensions are useful when applied to the types. Table 1 shows how each type can be grouped into these five categories. It can function as a Mendeleev's table of elements to locate more undesired effects. Table 2 provides the definitions and exemplar examples of each type with duplication of the same themes omitted.

### Confusion.

The comprehension of messages is a prerequisite for desirable attitudinal and behavioral outcomes to occur. One of the most common unintended effects of any communication efforts is the outcome of confusion and misunderstanding (Cho & Salmon, 2007), and advertising is no exception. The sub-area includes confusion toward the brand, the sponsor, and the content (e.g., disclaimers). Advertising is communication whose meaning is quintessentially brand related, with its communicative intent brand initiated (Dahlen & Rosengren, 2016). Therefore, confusion ultimately centers on misunderstanding that relates to the brand. Chakravarti and Xie (2006) examined the unintended associational effect of comparative advertising. The mere comparison of two (or more) brands reinforces consumers' perceived similarity of these brands, which often leads to sponsor misidentifications. Green and Armstrong (2012) found that advertising messages featured with government-mandated disclaims did not benefit consumers, instead, they increased confusion. An early review of advertising's effect on children by the National Science Foundation (1978) listed a host of undesirable effects, including confused assessment of products.

### Materialism.

Numerous studies over several decades have revealed that advertising stimulates materialistic values, especially among children and young people (e.g., Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; Churchill & Moschis, 1979; Pollay, 1986). Advertising arouses desires for products and propagates that acquiring material possessions is a huge part of a successful and fulfilling life. The finding that advertising enhances materialism is rigorous with support from both correlational and experimental studies (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). It also cuts across cultures, for example, both young people in China

and Western societies are affected by the materialistic messages after being exposed to advertising (Chan & McNeal, 2006; Jiang & Chia, 2009). Further, there is limited evidence indicating that among children, materialism and purchase-request act as mediators between advertising exposure and outcomes such as parent-child conflict, disappointment, and life dissatisfaction (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003).

### Idealization.

A body of research has examined the unintended consequences of idealized advertising messaging on females' psychological well-being, such as body esteem (Martin & Gentry, 1997; Richins, 1991). Gulas and McKeage (2000) extended this research to males and added the outcome of financial well-being. They found that exposure to idealized images of both physical attractiveness and financial success had a negative effect on males' self-perceived worthiness. More recent evidence pointed that food advertising causally contributed to physical well-being (e.g., obesity rates). For example, Zimmerman and Bell (2010) found that time spent viewing commercial television was significantly correlated with children's Body Mass Index (BMI), while time watching non-commercial television was not. Schwartz, Kunkel, and DeLucia (2013) found that heavy exposure to televised food advertising was associated with eating disorders, particularly among young people. In general, idealization represents an undesirable effect that deviates people from reality by aiming to elevate someone or something that may be unattainable.

### Stereotypes.

Stereotyping is prevalent in advertising. One of the unintended effects of advertising is the reinforcement of social stereotyping based on gender, race, and age. Eisend (2010)'s meta-analysis on gender roles in advertising found that: 1) gender stereotyping in advertising occurs mainly related to gender's occupational status and 2) gender stereotyping in advertising depends on gender-related developments and value changes in society. Stereotyping has decreased over the years, although the decrease is largely attributed to gender equality developments in high masculinity countries (e.g., Japan; Eisend, 2010). Maher, Childs, and Finn (2008)'s content analysis on racial stereotypes in children's television commercials found that all diverse ethnicities were underrepresented compared to Caucasians. Simcock and Sudbury (2006) found that most advertising celebrates youth, which



consciously or unconsciously denigrates older consumers through negative stereotyping.

### Boomerang.

The boomerang effect was coined by psychologists Hovland, Janis, and Kelly (1953) as the unintended effects that run counter to the objectives of persuasion messages (e.g., ads). For example, an unintended effect of aggressive advertising can be an overall increase in sales for rival firms (Anderson & Simester, 2013). Numerous studies (e.g., Jasperson & Fan, 2002; Meirick & Nisbett, 2011; Pinkleton, 1998) have reported that negative political advertising can backfire and harm the sponsor. Keller, Wilkinson, and Otjen (2010) found that an ad campaign aiming to counter domestic violence had triggered backlash among men, whose perceived severity of domestic violence decreased after the campaign.

Boomerang effect has typically been induced by reactance. As one of the most influential theories on persuasion resistance, PRT argues that people pride themselves as independent decision-makers without being susceptible to outside influence such as persuasive messages (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Hence, when the audience perceives a freedom threat in the message, they experience an aversive state called psychological reactance, which is comprised of anger and negative cognition (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Dillard & Shen, 2005). Psychological reactance prompts individuals to reassert threatened freedom, resulting in the boomerang effect. BP's \$93 million apologetic advertising after the Gulf oil spill backfired; people were angry at the company for spending lavishly on advertising instead of putting money for cleanup efforts and compensating victims affected (Kim & Choi, 2014). Edwards et al. (2002) found that the forced viewing of online "pop-up ads" irritated consumers, and the reactance subsequently lead to boomerang. Xu (2019) found that using loss-framed appeals in charity advertising led to reactance and boomerang.

### Violence.

The increasingly blurring line between advertising and entertainment points to the pivotal role of advertising for defining cultural norms, such as violence-related issues. There is limited research studying violence issues related to commercial media content and the role it may play in fostering violence (Rifon et al., 2010). Brocato, Gentile, Lacznia, Maier, and Ji-Song's experiment (2010) suggested that violent

ads created more aggressive thoughts among children than nonviolent ads. Zlatevska and Spence (2012) found that for aggressive individuals, social cause advertisements that show violent situations have unintended and undesirable consequences, in that these ads strengthened implicit associations with violence for aggressive individuals.

### Creativity.

Creativity is the soul of advertising and its branding strategies. It makes advertising more memorable with longer lasting impact. The generation of fresh and unique ideas gives life to ads in the hearts and minds of customers, which can be used as solutions to communication problems. Rosenberg et al. (2013) found that creative advertising increased consumers' processing of the messages, their self-perception as creative individuals, their performance in a subsequent creativity test, as well as the perceived value of the media content in which the ads were placed. Clearly, advertising creativity can produce unintended and positive effects that benefit more than the advertiser.

### Job Performance.

Marketing messages such as advertising are generally used to convey product information to external target audiences, however, they can also influence internal audiences (e.g., salespeople). Understanding the unintended effect of primarily externally directed ads on employees (e.g., salespeople) is a nascent line of inquiry. The extant literature exploring the relationship between ad perception and employees' attitudes or behaviors has reported both favorable and unfavorable outcomes. For example, Celsi and Gilly (2010) found that when employees rated the ads as effective and consistent with their values, their consumer focus increased. Hughes (2013) reported that positive ad evaluation and effective internal communication increased employees' selling effort and organizational pride. On the other hand, Seriki, Evans, Jeon, Dant, and Helm (2016) revealed that salespeople's perceptions of value incongruence and claim inaccuracy of advertising heightened organizational cynicism, which harmed job-related outcomes such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and extra-role performance.

### Economic Growth.

Kopf, Torres, and Enomoto (2011) found that advertising expenditures contribute significantly to the long-term eco-

economic growth among a group of 64 countries. Not only is the advertising spending associated with economic growth, it also brings about economic growth. This unintended effect is due to the fact that advertising acts as a subsidy for media, specifically, it has the unintended effect of subsidizing the flow of information through various media outlets such as newspapers, television, and the social media. Advertising is the most important maintaining force that economically supports the bulk of the media industry, especially the ubiquitous and exponentially important social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Most services provided by YouTube and Google would not be free of charge had it not been the contribution of advertising.

## Discussion

To date, empirical studies on the unintended effects of communication are limited, and the discussion is almost exclusively confined to health communication contexts concentrating on individual-level and content-specific effects (Cho & Salmon, 2007). The qualitative review presents a descriptive taxonomy that helps to characterize and contrast key elements. Specifically, the thematic analysis reviews three primary theoretical frameworks, unfolds five main dimensions, and introduces a typology of nine types of unintended effects. This line of inquiry can lead to important advancement in both theorizing and practice in advertising.

## Theoretical Implications

This study provides a bird's eye view of current literature and reveals a fine-grained complexity which needs to be unraveled by researchers endeavoring to study the impact of advertising in its totality. The synthesis also underscored the progress and inconsistency of the field. Not only does the review have descriptive qualities, but it also has prescriptive benefits.

Theoretical implications center on a deeper and broader understanding of unintended effects in communication in general and advertising in particular. Neuman (2018) stated that media effects are neither characteristically strong nor minimal, "they are characteristically highly variable" (p.370). When there is discrepancy between how the message was sent and how it was received, we should untangle what triggers the receiver's thinking and interpretive process to

deviate from the intended effects. Communication is a complex polysemic exchange by which various messages may or may not resonate with the intended recipients (Neuman, 2018). Naturally, there is huge variability in the effects of theorizing unintended effects. It is challenging to articulate how the three dominant theories (PRT, social comparison, and cultivation) can be combined into one integral framework that is capable of examining unintended effects in the realm of advertising.

There are very few conceptual frameworks that guide the investigation of unintended effects. What is obviously underdeveloped, if not completely absent, is a cohesive theory on the unintended effects of advertising. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) is widely used to study the impact of persuasive communication, including advertising. It is pertinent to the current review, and it has the potential to be an integrative theoretical framework assisting future research in this area, especially on content-specific effects. The ELM has been used to explain how consumers process substantive arguments and cues in advertising differently (Morimoto, 2017). It theorizes that when motivation is high and cognitive capacity permits, individuals will take the central route and engage in careful elaboration of the content of the persuasive message, which leads to more persistent attitude change. On the other hand, when the motivation, the cognitive capacity, or both are lacking, they rely on peripheral cues for attitude formation, which is likely short-lived (Chang, 2002).

The unintended effects might be driven by a communication gap, which exists between the advertiser's intent and the consumer's reception. It is possible that advertising audiences may create meanings from decoding that are not encoded by the advertiser. Further, when there is a mismatch between the argument advocated by the message and the route chosen, consumers may discredit the ad's central and intended argument as trivial, irrelevant or even offensive. If the central content is incompatible with the audience, the meaning would likely be gleaned from the peripheral cues in the advertising. The peripheral coding might produce unintended effects, especially among those to whom the central, content-based aspects of the advertising are inappropriate or incompatible. If audiences are naturally disposed to absorb certain non-content peripheral codes, then they are easily susceptible to the unintended effects (Preston, 1999). It is worth noting, though, that communication effects may be relevant or irrelevant to the content in question

**Table 1.** Dimensions of Unintended Effects of Advertising

	Valence		Level		Content		Audience		Time	
	Undesirable	Desirable	Individual	Societal	Specific	Diffusive	Intended	Unintended	Short	Long
Confusion	√		√		√		√		√	
Materialism	√		√		√	√	√			√
Idealization	√		√		√		√		√	
Stereotypes	√		√		√		√			√
Boomerang	√		√		√		√		√	
Violence	√		√	√	√		√	√	√	√
Creativity		√	√		√		√		√	
Job performance	√	√	√		√			√	√	
Economic growth		√		√		√	√	√		√

(Go to [pg. 7](#), [pg. 12](#))

**Table 2.** Typology of Unintended Effects of Advertising

Type	Definition	Exemplar Examples
Confusion	Confusion, misunderstanding, and misconception after exposure to advertising messages.	Chakravarti and Xie (2006), and Green and Armstrong (2012)
Materialism	The preference for material goods as a means of achieving success, happiness, and self-fulfillment.	Buijzen and Valkenburg (2003), Chan and McNeal (2006), Churchill and Moschis (1979), Jiang and Chia (2009), and Pollay (1986)
Idealization	The undesirable effect that deviates people from reality by aiming to elevate someone or something that may be unattainable.	Gulas and McKeage (2000), Martin and Gentry (1997), Richins (1991), Schwartz, Kunkel, and DeLucia (2013), and Zimmerman and Bell (2010)
Stereotypes	The belief, perpetuation and characterization of all people in a certain group to share certain traits.	Eisend (2010), Maher, Childs, and Finn (2008), and Simcock and Sudbury (2006)
Boomerang	The unintended effects that run counter to the objectives of advertisers, led by reactance (an adverse state composed of anger and negative cognition).	Anderson and Simester (2013), Edwards, Li, and Lee (2002), Keller, Wilkinson, and Otjen (2010), Kim and Choi (2014), Jasperson and Fan, 2002, Meirick, and Nisbett (2011), and Pinkleton (1998) and Xu (2019)
Violence	Aggressive attitudes and/or behaviors.	Brocato, Gentile, Lacznia, Maier, and Ji-Song (2010), and Zlatevska and Spence (2012)
Creativity	The generation of fresh and unique ideas in advertising, which can be used as solutions to communication problems.	Rosengren, Dahlen, and Modig (2013)
Job performance	Job-related outcomes in the context of employ-organization relationship, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and extra-role performance.	Celsi and Gilly (2010), Hughes (2013), Seriki, Evans, Jeon, Dant and Helm (2016)
Economic growth	The increase in what a country produces over time, typically measured by GDP.	Kopf, Torres, and Enomoto (2011)

(McLeod & Reeves, 1980). As seen in Table 1, most unintended effects are content-specific, which are generated primarily due to what was presented in the ads (e.g., controversial content). Others (e.g., economic growth) may be content-diffusive, which are not driven by any particular content featured in the ads. ELM is likely a sounder framework guiding in the content-specific rather than the content-diffusive spectrum.

## Practical Implications

Not only do the findings add more insights to the unintended effect of advertising, but they also shed light that may help advertisers, policymakers, and consumers to cope more effectively with various persuasion attempts. There are good reasons advertisers should take notice of this review. It provides practitioners with a bigger and up-to-date picture of outcomes among consumers that are unanticipated or unwanted by the advertiser. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), for example, oversees direct-to-consumer prescription drug advertising. The agency has established a “Bad Ad” program, a reporting system through which inappropriate messaging in violation of FDA might be revealed (FDA, 2018). Albeit helpful, such programs do not guarantee the disappearance of misinformation. Hopefully, this review can help practitioners shepherd their organizations or clients through nuanced situations.

On a positive note, Rosengren et al. (2013) encourage advertisers not only to take responsibility for avoiding unintended negative effects on consumers but also to explore factors that potentially could generate positive effects that benefit consumers. In showing that advertising has unintended positive effects (e.g., creativity and economic growth), the current inquiry should be seen as a call to learn more about how advertising can benefit more than the advertiser. Advertising must continuously extend the range of effects to stay relevant. It is imperative for advertisers to examine the unintended negative effects of advertising and to pursue positive extended effects on consumers’ well-being for advertising to survive and thrive in the long run (Dahlen & Rosengren, 2016).

## Limitations and Future Research

This study has a few limitations. The review was limited to peer-reviewed published literature. Non-peer reviewed or

grey literature relating to this subject was not included, albeit the sample was large and representative enough for major themes to emerge. Another limitation is that although the study elucidated a number of themes, there is a wide variation in the existing literature. “Unintended” implies that something is unexpected and unpredictable. Hence, unintended effects may be contextual and differ from situation to situation.

It is hoped that this research will assist in stimulating renewed interest in the unintended effects of advertising. Moreover, this review provides foundation for developing important streams for future research. First, future research should explore whether there is a blur between intended and unintended effects (Preston, 1999). Second, ELM is proposed as a possible framework to guide the research, we should strive to extend theory within this branch of advertising scholarship. The overarching theory needs to be able to identify the conditions under which communication is received as intended, when it is not, and why. Third, as this is still a nascent area with limited empirical evidence, we urge researchers to conduct more studies on the unintended effects of advertising. For example, it is important to investigate the long-term consequences and the impact of individual difference factors (Defever, Pandelaere, & Roe, 2011). There is also a host of questions for future endeavors from a practical perspective. For example, is there a rubric as to how much unintended adverse effect is tolerable? Can and how do advertisers strike a balance between intended and unintended effects? Are some adverse effects more acceptable than others? Can the ends justify the means, i.e., can achieving some important intended effects justify any unintentional adverse consequences?

Advertising proves to be a powerful influencer with far-reaching consequences for audiences who are frequently exposed to it. Overall, the discussion on unintended effects is a valuable increment brought to advertising research. This study attempts to serve as a stepping-stone to open new venues for future research. The dimensions and types presented in this thematic analysis represent the first attempt to sort out and organize scattered evidence of unintended effects in advertising. We hope that the initial typology will serve as an evolving framework to invite more scholars to this field and work on a more rigorous theoretical structure, which can further enhance the theory and practice of advertising.



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### Corresponding author

Jie Xu, Department of Communication, Villanova University, 800 Lancaster Ave., Garey Rm 20, Villanova, PA 19085, USA, Phone: 1-610-519-5882, Fax: 1-610-519-7749, Email: [jie.xu@villanova.edu](mailto:jie.xu@villanova.edu).

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